DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 185 549 CS 205 453

AUTHOR Agee, Hugh
TITLE Hackneyed, Acned, or Just Plain Good: Perceiving Quality in Young Adult Fiction.
PUB DATE Mar 80
NOTE 20p.: Paper presented at the combined Annual Meeting of the Secondary School English Conference and the Conference on English Education (Omaha, NE, March 27-29, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Literature: Adolescents: *Evaluation Methods: *Literary Criticism: *Literature Appreciation: Novels: Secondary Education

ABSTRACT

A rating scale was developed by Stephen Dunning for evaluating adolescent literature objectively. The distinguishing features of the scale's five categories are designed to produce a numerical score between 5 and 25 (each category a 1-to-5 ranking for poor/excellent quality), indicating the relative worth of a specific literary work. The first four categories are traditional elements of literary analysis: style, structure, characterization, and theme. The fifth category, adult role and adult/adolescent relationships, is a unique feature of most adolescent literature. Raters who use this scale have discovered that their ratings do not always match their subjective reactions; so one adjustment to using the scale is the addition of written statements to augment the numerical ratings and to document the similarities and differences between objective and subjective responses. Samples of eleventh grade student ratings and responses have been compared to those of teachers, illustrating how students and teachers respond to literature in different ways. (The novels rated and discussed are Maureen Daly's "Seventeenth Summer," "If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever?" by M. E. Kerr, Robert Cormier's "The Chocolate War," and Alice Childress' "A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich.") (RL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED185549

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Hackneyed, Acned, or Just Plain Good: Perceiving Quality in Young Adult Fiction

Hugh Agee
University of Georgia

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Hugh Agee

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Conference on English Education
March 27-29, 1980
Omaha, Nebraska

CS205453

The genesis of this paper dates back more than two years ago when I began to ask students in my courses on literature for adolescents to rate the literary quality of Young Adults novels we were reading. The instrument I provided was the rating scale developed by Stephen Dunning in his doctoral dissertation (1959) and subsequently reported in his article "Criticism and the 'Young Adult Novel'" (1962). The five categories and their distinguishing features are as follows:

Style

A. The style is capable of contributing to the reader's esthetic appreciations. It has both clarity and beauty of expression.
B. The language of the conversations and descriptions create a sense of reality.
C. The vocabulary and figurative language are generally effective rather than pedestrian.

Structure

A. The novel demonstrates mature techniques of narrative through use of parallelism, flashback, introspection, stream of consciousness, et cetera.

B. The plot has unique aspects; it avoids such characteristics of the trash novels as excessive coincidence and "baited hook" chapter endings.

C. The plot manifests psychological, if not literal truth.

Characterization

A. Character is thoroughly, rather than superficially delineated. It is developed in a variety of ways rather than merely established descriptively.

B. Conversations of the adolescent characters represent the adolescent idiom. All characters' conversations "ring true."

C. The main adolescent characters:

(1) are adequately motivated in their behavior;

(2) are made to live with the consequences of their decisions;

(3) develop sequentially rather than spontaneously;

(4) grow into an understanding of their capabilities and limitations;

(5) are characterized rather than caricatured; and

(6) react realistically to the situations which confront them.

Theme

A. The theme offers adolescents some important perspective upon the nature of human experience.

B. The theme is treated seriously and respectfully.

C. The theme helps determine the structure of the novel yet does not dominate any single element.

D. The theme deals with an important adolescent need or developmental task and reflects values appropriate to our heritage.

Adult role and adult-adolescent relationships

A. Adult characters reflect an accurate round of adult life--its responsibilities, satisfactions, and problems.

B. Activities and characterizations of adults are representative rather stereotyped.

C. Relationships between adults and adolescents are sensitively drawn. The two age groups are presented as fellow-members of a species, with common interests and problems.

D. Adolescents' perceptions of adult life are consistent with their perception of other things.

Each category is rated on a 1 to 5 basis with a 1 for poor quality and a 5 for excellent quality. Thus the range for any given novel will be between 5 and 25 as a total score on these critical aspects. The first four categories are traditional elements of literary analysis; the fifth, adult role and adult-adolescent relationships, is a unique feature of most Young Adult novels.

My initial purpose in employing Dunning's scale was to provide a basic set of criteria for undergraduates and for experienced teachers who were studying the Young Adult novel in depth for the first time. With these criteria we could weigh the relative merits of each book read in common, and these criteria could also be applied to each reader's out-of-class readings. One key point soon became evident: many readers began to discover that the ratings they assigned books sometimes did not match their subjective reactions. This experience brought into focus the differences between subjective and objective responses to literature.

I continued to gather data from my classes through the use of the Dunning scale; however, I began to ask for written statements on the books in addition

to the numerical ratings themselves to document the similarities and differences between the objective and subjective responses. In preparation for this conference, I collected a sample of eleventh grade student ratings and written responses to some of the same novels experienced teachers had been reading and evaluating in my classes. The sampling of these that follow constitute only a progress report of my continuing explorations of the way teachers and students perceive quality in Young Adult novels. Therefore, my observations and any conclusions at this point must be regarded as tentative.

The novels rated and discussed below are Maureen Daly's Seventeenth Summer (1942), M. E. Kerr's If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever? (1973), Robert Cormier's The Chocolate War (1974), and Alice Childress' A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich (1973).

Mr. J. M. (teacher) on Seventeenth Summer:

Dunning scale: 1 3 1 1 2

My least favorite novel was Seventeenth Summer by Maureen Daly. Here everyone was a stereotype and every situation was contrived. The story droned on in such a monotonous way that each day is difficult to distinguish from another. Perhaps the language and vocabulary of the characters were significant of the times, but I found it unreal and flat.

I'm not sure now what was the theme of the book. I don't believe it offered anything important about the nature of real human experience. It's hard to imagine that the book continues to sell year after year. I kept thinking of Ozzie and Harriet for some reason. The only thought provoking character was Lorraine and she didn't have her head on straight. Perhaps that is what made her even the least bit interesting.

The adults here so stereotyped it hurt. I saw them as completely removed from the lives of the adolescent character, definitely not having common interests and problems.

I thought I would never finish it. What's more, I wasn't even sure when I did finish with it. It sort of slithered away just as the rest of summer had. It's not on my best-seller list.

Ms. R. R. (teacher) on Seventeenth Summer

Dunning scale: 1 2 1 2 2

I had to continually remind myself while reading this book that it was written in the late 30's or early 40's, because I kept trying to fix an image in my mind of a family of Puritans living in the 18th century in New England. For the most part, the love story seems to be too idealistic to be a quasi-realistic depiction of a teenage romance. I simply cannot feature any seventeen

year old, then or even a decade later when I was a teenager, looking at nature with such acute perspicuity. I had the distinct impression that Daly had probably just rediscovered the Romantic poets and immediately took to the fields to absorb the most minute details of nature to use as 'fluff' for her story. Daly inundates the reader with sensory imagery ad nauseum: e.g. the moths were so prevalent that they appeared to be of epidemic proportion.

It also occurred to me that Daly was probably a frustrated young woman. I had the feeling that she was trying to sensualize all of nature because she was unfulfilled otherwise....

Ms. C. C. (11th grade student) on Seventeenth Summer:

Dunning scale: 4 3 3 4 2

After finishing the book, I realized that whatever goes on in my mind is not just solo, but that every girl has mostly the same thoughts.

Although I've never had a long term relationship such as that in the book, I feel that I would have and probably have already handled the situations similarly to the way Angie did in the book.

I noticed that I found myself having some of the same experiences and find that I react to them just as any other girl would do.

The story did give me ideas on how to react to something that might happen like it did in the book.

I also noticed that this story, although it's 30 yrs. old, is just like others that are really happening around me. Other people are doing just what happened in the book.

The main character of the story, Angie, is the only one that I can place with a real person I know and that person is me. She does things like I do and she thinks like me, also. It really amazed me to find that there is

someone else in the world like me...just like me.

If I had the opportunity to talk to the author the only things I would ask are ideas or feelings that the author had while writing this book. She must have really had a brilliant brainstorm to carry the events in this book along without losing their meaning. Most authors lose the idea of what he really started out to write, but Maureen Daly amazingly kept things in perspective as they happened.

Ms. J. H. (11th grade student) on If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever?

Dunning scale: 4 3 3 4 4

This book was a little weard to start with. I kept getting confused, but after it got going it was OK. I caught on to the way the author was writing. I really can't associate this story with anyone, but I do think it could happen. I have never seen a T.V. show related to this book. Most of the time the odd ball stays the odd ball and the stud stays the stud.
I felt kindda sorry about Alan at the end of the book, but then I was happy for Doomed.

There will always be a stud at any school, and there will always be a odd ball too. I don't see how people can pick on other people about the way they act or look. I think this book brought this out real good, because in the end Alan was the odd one.

Ms. S. H. (11th grade student) on If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever?

Dunning scale: 4 4 3 3 4

When I first started reading this story I thought "God this is one strange story." But after the first page it got quite interesting. I thought it was crazy, and some of the characters reminded me of some people I know. The ending was a surprise but I kinda figured something like that wouldve happened.

It seems true to life because often people think they love someone and its really just a strong affection they feel toward that person. It's good that their was some adult married life included in the story.

Sophie, Leah's sister, kinda reminded me of myself when she was trying to get her sister to come in the house. Sometimes I act like that toward my sister and her boy friend.

That boy that talks to much kinda reminds me of O___ because he's always talking about any and every thing he can think of.

Ms. H. B. (teacher) on If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever?

Dunning scale: 3 3 3 3 3

This book was just not credible to me. I know kids get caught up in fads, but the one described in this story just doesn't ring true to me.

I'm fairly certain, as I said in my journal, that I have a block against this novel. I am sure that my experiences over the last year have greatly colored my opinion of it. It depresses me because of the interaction--or lack of interaction--of the characters. They all seem to be going around in their own little bubble, bumping against each other but never merging to make one bigger mass. If there is real truth of any kind either I missed it or I disliked it so intensely that I refushed to see it.

The theme is also vague to me. I didn't seem to be able to pull anything together and come up with something substantial. The interaction between adults and adolescents was also not an accurate picture to me.

Ms. P.O. (teacher) on If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever?

Dunning scale: 1 3 1 1 1

As I read this book, I got so tired of Alan and his problems. His mother was still in love with a man who ran out on her years ago. And that man, Alan's father, was a drunkard who couldn't contain himself even once for Alan to visit. Duncan's mother proved to be unfaithful to her husband, and the coach was a despicable slob in general. The author tries to paint Duncan as a non-conformist hero, but at the book's end he is falling into a pattern like everybody else. How could Alan have anything or anybody to hold on to? His entire world turned out to be populated with fake, hypocritical people, as I see it. No wonder he feels so flippant about life at the end of the book.

Ms. R. H. (11th grade student) on The Chocolate War

Dunning scale: 4+ 4+ 5 4+ ?-

My immediate reaction to the story was pure horror. So called horror stories (as by Stephen King) definitely obtain the expected response from me: heart stopping terror of the supernatural or unknown. But the recoiling fear envoked by this story is of another type; it is colder, less dramatic, yet more deadly.

When fictionally confronted with aliens, lunatics, or poisonous invaders, we are prone to morbid curiosity, a fascination with the dangerous or grotesque. We would rather turn away from a story such as The Chocolate War, however, because it pulls to light cruelty and desparation in human behavior that we all know is latent in everyone.

The course of events as involved Jerry Renault clearly point out the anxious need for acceptance so powerful in adolescents. Teenagers will go to nearly any lengths to conform, be one of the crowd, be accepted. Often this rabid of addication of responsibility for one's own actions carries over into adulthood.

Archie served as a study in abuse of (almost) absolute power. It constantly amazes me the lengths to which people will go in their cruelty to other people. People are capable of fervently believing a totally irrational justification, which is awesome, or proceeding without benefit of a conscience to be placate, which is worse.

I guess what really bothers me is that I am a people, too. I've laughed at another's cutting jokes and seen the hysteria of fights and portending interracial wars.

The book overall, was extremely were written. Jerry is by no means the only well developed character. The characters well uniformly treated with understanding, depth, and no condescension. It was a highly readable, engrossing book.

Ms. B. J. (teacher) on The Chocolate War

Dunning scale: 5 4 3 2 1

Even though The Chocolate War was rated very low, I still could not describe it as a failure because I didn't finish the book without a definite reaction, even though it was unfavorable. There was a recurring action (the roll call) throughout the book and there was the final struggle between good and evil.

The characterization was stereotyped and overly done. Brother Leon was not believeable, the protagonist never stepped out of the 'good' role, and the gang never changed. The only character who had to live with the consequences of his decision was the 'good' guy.

The section on the rating chart that shows the lowest score is the adult-adolescent relationship. Brother Leon's involvement with a gang of hoodlums was unrealistic; also, the protagonist had no adult with whom he could turn for help.

Ms. P. S. (teacher) on A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich

Dunning scale: 5 5 5 5 5

Based on my experience with Black young people, I found Alice Childress's style in A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich realistic. The actual pronunciation of words is perfectly delineated, and the "jive" expressions are phrases I hear daily. The structure is fascinating--a character tells his/her own story--and this structure creates real people rather than sterotypic characters. Today's young people need heroes to emulate, and so many, expecially Blacks, choose professional sports heroes who make a lot of money. Benjie finds a real hero and learns who a hero really is--a person who loves you, accepts you, and believes in you. The anguish Rose feels over Benjie's heroin habit and her futile attempts to reach him are instrumental in depicting a realistic adult-adolescent relationship as is Butler's desire to stay out of the situation but his eventual acceptance of his deep and necessary involvement to save Benjie.

Ms. R. V. R. (teacher) on A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich

Dunning scale: 5 5 5 5 5

Style: One could not say that there is any beauty of expression, but clear it was. The language was not offensive because it seemed to fit the story. Often offensive language seems inserted simply for shock effect; I don't think that was done in this case. Not living in a black family, not having ever lived in a black ghetto family, the conversations created a believable reality in such a capacity as I'm able to visualize. I found the language to be highly effective. After a description of Butler and Rose getting ready to go out, Benjie says, "When they hit the sidewalk, he's holding his hand and whistlin for a taxi like he the King of New York." "That's what you call

happy...That's man-woman, and you haven't grown up to know bout that yet." The last two statements made by grandma.

Structure: Introspection is present in quantity and quality in all the characters. Childress also uses some stream of consciousness technique. The unique feature of the structure is the perspectives offered by each of the characters of the problems at hand. Based on the maturity of the characteristic vision, each offers not only literal truth, but mature psychological insights into human behaviors and relationships.

Characterization: The characters are fully drawn, believably speaking personalities. They fulfill the Dunning scale to a very high degree on each point except that Benjie does not, in the course of the book, grow into an understanding of his capabilities and limitations. Depending on the reader's disposition, Benjie may or may not mature into acceptable behavior for which society and his adult companions wish.

Theme: Benjie sees mature love, responsibility, family strife, death, old age from a very close perspective. I believe the theme of drug abuse was treated seriously and as respectfully as possible. The values of our heritage with regards to drugs and adult conflict are reflected accurately in the adult characters. The immature and not completely thoughtout views of the young citizens of today are seen in Benjie and the other youthful characters. Bringing in the value conflicts of the two teachers was a stroke of genius. Even more so, when a detached character notes that both teachers are indispensable to the school community.

Adult role...The roles played by each character were so lifelike that it was most difficult to read this novel as fiction and not non-fiction. I felt not only a personal involvement with each character, but I was also aware of the characters involvement with each other.

Summary statement--It is a shame that some rather minor objection to the novel are eclipsing the important message of the book.

Ms. S. F. (11th grade student) on A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich:

Dunning scale: 5 5 5 5 5

My immediate response to the novel was confusing because of the fashion in which the book was written. But as I began to read further and started to understand the author's set up of the story, the novel became more interesting and gave me a feeling of wanting to read on and on. There were parts of the story that I could associate with everday happenings. For example, Benjie was a character in the novel who lived a kind of lonely life like some people do in reality. He thought that no one cared about him and wanted someone to turn to. He lived with his mother and stepfather. It was his stepfather's love that he wanted so badly.

I can relate Benjie mother, Rosie, to a person that I know. Like in the story, Rosie has a problem in knowing how to talk to Benjie. I think that she had this problem because she felt that Benjie would only take what she had to say lightly or he would only take what she had to say the wrong way. As I was saying, there is this person that has this same type of problem. That's mainly the reason why I enjoyed the novel the way I did. Because it's characters seemed real and the scenes were like those that happen in reality.

Mr. B. J. (11th grade student) on A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich:

Dunning scale: 5 5 5 5 5

A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich is a very good, and true book. (story) I can picture this story happening in a big city such as New York. The character's were very alive. They were very open in the way that Black people live in a city like New York. I compared this to a scene on "White Shadow,"

and also a scene from "Good Times." The relationship between a boy and his habits, that separated him and his friends is very true today. The relationship between the boy (Benjie) and his step-father (Butler Graig) is very true. But the most exciting part of the book had to be the way that the writer (Alice Childress) wrote the book. The book was written in the Black style of talkin, and made it very hard too read. I think Benjie just got a-lot-of pressue from his peer group, and was trying to punish his mother for devorcing his father, and marrying Butler Graig. But he did meet Butler because that funeral really frighten him and when Butler saved his life. So they did become close friends and a Happy endin.

One basic distinction between the rating of a novel using the Dunning scale and a written assessment of the same work is that a Dunning scale rating is text-centered while the written statement frequently becomes reader-centered. This holds true both for teachers and students in the above examples. The most notable exception of a reader following closely the details of the Dunning scale is seen in Ms. R. V. R.'s written assessment of A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich in which she addresses the specific categories of the scale. However, even in this we note personal involvement, plus a summary statement that reflects her strong feeling for the book already expressed in a quantitive score of 25 on the Dunning scale.

The variance between the student's rating of Seventeenth Summer and those of the two teachers reflect not only the age differences of the respondents but also a differing degree of personal involvement with the story. The eleventh grade female student identifies with Angie, and the stereotyping that turns off the teachers seems not to bother the student reader.

A similar contrast follows in the student and teacher reactions to If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever? The two student readers assign identical scale scores of 18 to this novel, but the two teachers rate it 15 and 7. Both teachers express negative reactions that are of a personal nature.

The two responses to The Chocolate War also provide an interesting contrast. In this case, the student is able to express her thoughts and feelings more cogently than the teacher. The student's scale score is much more positive.

The responses of students and teachers to A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich are included here to show that there is not always disagreement about the quality of a novel. All four raters give the novel a scale score of 25. However, we do find differences in the written comments that reflect once again

young readers' relating the characters and events of their reading to personal feelings and experiences.

There are additional observations I could make about the nature of these evaluations, but time does not permit that here. To show that students and teachers respond to literature in different ways has been my intent. I feel that the examples I have shared in this paper support this contention.

REFERENCES

Dunning, A. S. A definition of the role of the junior novel based on analyses of thirty selected novels. Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1959.

Dunning, S. Criticism and the 'young adult novel.' High School Journal, 1962, 45, 208-213.